



# HOO CHH MINH'S REVENGE VIETNAMESE GANGS INVADE AMERICA

**S**UMMER, 1975. NIGHT NOW AWAITS ME. I AM BEING RECALLED TO NATORM HEADQUARTERS. DO I HAVE TO GO BACK TO THIS HELL AGAIN?

Sweat runs down my back like a slow, writhing snake. I'm gripping a rifle on the banks of Vietnam's Yan River. Scowling VCs face me across the water, lobbing grenades and blasting ammo. A tiny Vietnamese boy walks up and watches as my ass gets blown away by Cong soldiers. Another dead Yankee.

Where were we? My brother fought in Vietnam when I was as small as the kid standing next to me. We tacked a newspaper map of Vietnam on our basement door. Da Nang. Pleiku. I knew my bro went there to kill "gooks." I ran out to the car as he left for the airport, begging him to let me kill "gooks," too. Now I'm in an arcade playing a video game called NAM-1975, and the "gooks" just killed *me*. GAME OVER.

This ain't Vietnam, it's Orange County, California, the USA's model suburban jungle. Widely considered the nation's most conservative county, its numbingly faceless terrain is home to Disneyland, Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, and the Nixon Library. Anti-homo evangelists and pro-life terrorists are celebrities here. Planes fly into John Wayne Airport. Anaheim hosts the California Angels, owned by Indian-killin' buckaroo Gene Autry. Yippie-yi-yo-ki-ay!

Everywhere in Orange County looks like everywhere else in Orange County: flat pavement, micro-malls, palm trees, and sunshine. Hot, smog-glazed boulevards stretch forever past

trailer parks, gated condos, and beige warehouses. Dull pastels spring from nowhere and swallow the landscape. It's a celebration of synthetic carpeting, plastic plants, and air freshener. Been to Denny's lately? Then you've been to Orange County.

Amid this conformist splendor live an estimated one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese, the largest Viet ghetto outside of Vietnam. Nearly all are refugees, "boat people" who fled after Saigon's fall. They huddle in the quiet towns of Westminster, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana. It's a self-contained fishbowl of a world. Most of these households speak primarily Vietnamese. They funnel their dough into Vietnamese-owned shops. Like other Asian immigrants, they're entrepreneurial wizards.

Of course, Vietnam and America go together like soy sauce on a Twinkie. This oriental-occidental clash sparks some weird fusions: Buddhist scriptures in hotel rooms, shaven monks at the laundromat, and giggling Asian girls whizzing by in subcompacts with "Are We Having Fun Yet?" bumper stickers. A home-grown Viet music industry begets clumsy versions of "Me So Horny" and (what community would be complete without?) Elvis and Madonna impersonators. Free tabloids and newspapers, all in Vietnamese, scream with headlines such as SAMMY DAVIS JR. KHONG THIEU NO and O TUOI 60, CLINT EASTWOOD HET CON NGAU. The Viet vibe is strongest in Westminster's Little Saigon, an explosion of fresh squid, herbal pharmacies, and laser acupuncturists. It's a briny stew to a Westerner, but admirably clean and tidy. Nice, bright, shiny, and nice....

**U**nless you count sadistic, Uzi-strapped street gangs. When people in this sealed society are assaulted or robbed, it's almost always by someone Vietnamese, probably a teenaged gangster. Viet gangs stalk their own kind. They rarely, if ever, attack other ethnic groups. A merciless minority within the community, they frighten other Viets into silence.

Police have identified up to seventy-four Vietnamese gangs based in or passing through Orange County. Most are mere boys, ranging in age from twelve to twenty. They call themselves Cheap Boyz, Scar Boyz, Orange Boyz, Natoma Boyz, Mohawk Boyz, Santa Ana Boyz, Oriental Boyz, and Lonely Boyz Only. There are girlz, too, among them Dirty Punks, South Side Scissors, Banana Girlz, and IBK—Innocent But Killers.

Vietnamese gangs differ radically from most street gangs. First off, they're better armed. They have a fondness, nah, a *fetish*, for high-caliber automatic weapons. Second, they never claim turf. Members are free to leave or switch gangs at any time. There are no bloody initiations or "jumping out" ceremonies. The only condition for membership is a willingness to break the law.

Viet gangs coexist peacefully with other Viet posses to the point where they plan and run capers together. When violence breaks out, it's usually a personal vendetta or a cockfight over a female, not an economic war between rival cartels. Ten Vietnamese gangs could go to the same party, and the worst that might happen is a hangover or two.

Unlike L.A.'s cocaine warriors, Orange County's Viet gangs aren't known for slinging dope. They prefer property offenses such as extortion, fraud schemes, grand theft auto, and computer-chip heists. (Chip-running can be more lucrative and harder to prosecute than selling crack.)



**A Vietnamese Elvis impersonator.**

Crimes are typically staged in "crash pads," motel rooms chosen from among America's wide selection of low-cost dinginess. One person rents a room, then invites up to twenty friends in, razing the mattresses and tearing down wall fixtures. They'll go make a hit and return to the pad, ready for a criminals' pajama party. Frighteningly mobile, the same group may pull jobs on both coasts within forty-eight hours, driving or plane-hopping from scene to scene. It's a nifty way to avoid getting nabbed. At a recent arrest in Texas, police found gang members from California, New York, Kansas City, and Oklahoma sharing the same hotel room. Viet gangs like to drift, settling nowhere.

Their signature crime is the home-invasion robbery. Viets tend to distrust American banks and keep their gold, cash, or jewelry at home. Gangs meticulously case Viet houses for valuables, noting all residents and their daily schedules, plotting escape routes, setting up fences, and generally scheming like architects.

Then comes the violation. One person, often a female, taps on the front door. Someone answers, and a masked gang rushes in, taking the family hostage. They bind and gag their victims with duct tape or telephone cords. When the gang feels a family isn't coughing up all the loot, they torture its weakest members. They've zapped babies with stun guns, poured scalding water on grandmothers, dunked infants' heads in toilets, jabbed their prey with hypodermic needles, and punched little girls in the nose. They're quick to pistol-whip (or shoot) anyone who resists. In '86, they wasted a mother of fourteen children while she prayed.

Not surprisingly, victims have been reluctant to identify their assailants. In a closed community, news and threats travel fast. Gangs exploit the Viets' cultural isolation. Many Viets are unfamiliar with the US bail system. They see gangsters back on the streets hours after being arrested. Figuring the cops were bribed, they clam up.

Police see little evidence of older, syndicated Asian mobsters pulling the strings. The more entrenched Asian criminal groups (such as Frogmen, Paratroopers, Hung Pho, and Viet Ching) don't usually mingle with street gangs because, shucks, the young'uns won't show respect for authority! Police have, however, noticed a continent-wide "Vietnamese Underground Railroad," a network of cafes, pool halls, and restaurants. Through word-of-mouth, street gangsters know the "safe houses" from L.A. to Boston, Vancouver to Tijuana. They collect names and numbers in each city, pooling their felonious info. If the law busts a gangsters' coffee shop in, say, Dallas, most of Orange County's Vietnamese gangs will know about it the next day.

"Their grapevine is outrageous," says Garden Grove police officer Al Butler, "[but] I don't think we're going to see the traditional national organization develop for a number of years yet." A jovial Santa sans whiskers, Butler says Viets are democratic by nature and resist being led. Viet gangs don't have "godfathers." The "leader" is whoever wants to orchestrate the next crime. Everyone's opinions are considered important, and everyone

shares in the booty. "They've already got the contacts," Butler says. "You just need leadership.... But if they ever *decide* to get organized, uh, we're gonna be in deep shit."

The Garden Grove PD keeps three albums full of photos confiscated from Viet gangs. Leafing through, one finds them hoisting machine guns, snarling like wolverines, and lying in pools of blood. Someone's bare shoulder shows juicy red gashes made by a cop's K-9. One proud crew surrounds a NEED HELP? PLEASE CALL POLICE sign. The Four T's brandish their tattooed logo, Vietnamese words starting with 'T' meaning Love, Money, Prison, and Crime.

Most subjects pose with skeletal, reptilian grace. They prefer natty, Vegas-style uniforms—call it *Saigon Vice*: gel-encrusted pompadours, loud polka dots, crisp disco suits, and Italian shoes. Taking their cues from Europe, especially Paris, they favor dance-oriented new wave and black threads. Many wear beepers. It's often impossible to tell a Vietnamese gangster from a Vietnamese insurance salesman.

Chameleonic, Viet gangs avoid external symbolism such as graffiti and "colors." Slippery, they almost always deny being members. Scars are the best visual tip-off. In half-psychotic displays of endurance, Viet gangsters sizzle their flesh with cigarettes. The scar, typically on the hand or arm, indicates readiness to commit crime. More scars usually mean more experience. When gangsters cruise cafes



**The Vietnamese Madonna.**

and restaurants searching for accomplices, the first thing they look for is dead, mottled skin.

**K**ong has a big-ass cigarette scar between the knuckles of his middle and index fingers. It looks like a chewed blob of bubble gum. He covers it with a pool cue and slams the thirteen ball into the side pocket. Kong admits to running some car-insurance scams with gangsters, but he denies being a member.

"ĐỪNG ĐỂ GIAN PHI  
HOÀNH HÀNH KHU  
XÓM BẠN Ở"



HÀNG XÓM HÃY TRÔNG CHỪNG CHO NHAU  
ĐỂ CÙNG **TÔI** ÁC  
CHỒNG LẠI

Last week, a Viet gang hit his next-door neighbors' house in broad daylight. They took everything, from cash to sneakers. "When they do it, they don't *feel*," Kong says. "They don't care if baby or old people, they don't care.... We don't want to talk because newspapers is all bad. Vietnamese people always doing bad. They killed this, they steal that. We want you to talk about good. I'm a hard-working guy."

Kong went to school in highlands near Saigon during the Vietnam War. He remembers American soldiers: He says they gave "candy" to some of his classmates, killing them. When the communists took over, the US began to look like the lesser of

two evils. After seventeen failed attempts, Kong escaped Vietnam on a boat six years ago. He says he'll return next year to visit his parents. "I'll open a Disneyland in my country," he smiles. Kong studies auto repair in the daytime. He says he has more money and less friends than he did in Vietnam. "The kids see all the money here, and they want it, too. Quick. Back in Vietnam, you have no money. No gangs, too. You do a crime and you run, but you have no place to run. The police catch you, they hurt you and beat you. Here, it's too easy to do crime. It's easy to get away. You have money, you can go anywhere. A hotel room, another state. I like America. I like freedom.... Kids join gangs here because it's the American way."

**C**offee time. Electric fans yawn in this dark cafe as I slurp iced java and try not to look Caucasian. Christmas lights blink epileptically. Drum-heavy Viet pop swirls loudly all around. Young Asian males eyeball me, their faces glowing blue from table-top video games. Brian, born in Saigon but now a California boy, asks the cafe owner if it's cool to talk. It's cool.

Brian says he was asked to join a gang in high school but refused. He later flirted with a member of the Wally Girlz and found all his tires slashed. He's seen female gangsters gouge out people's faces using their high heels. "They have no concept of life and death," he says sheepishly. "I don't think they do it for money. They do it for *fun*. See who can be the baddest.... They don't care. What've they got to lose?"

"I'm risking my life talking to you guys," he tells us, anxiously baring his teeth. "When I'm driving home from here, I look in my mirror every two seconds. I'm afraid they'll tail me. I'm always afraid somebody's gonna tail me. One night I was coming down here on the Garden Grove Freeway, and I got off on the ramp, and this black car with smoked windows catches up on my left side. The back window rolls down, a rifle comes out, and I slam on my brakes. They missed me. They were Vietnamese. I don't even think they *knew* me."

Each second, I know less and less. "How do you know *I'm* not a gang member?" he teases. "The media, every time you see a story, there's a lot of fantasy. I had a friend, nineteen, who shot himself at a local firing range. I was *there*. He turned around, stuck the gun under his chin, and BLAM!—killed

himself. The newspapers said it was an accident. That's why I don't trust the newspapers. The gangsters don't, either." Gulp.

His eyes bulge as he scans the other tables. "You guys are moving targets in this area. This is a real suicide mission. Just get into the surface. Don't go any further. Because if you get into this deep, you'll never get out of it. It's like going into the mouth of a cobra."

He stiffens. "It's time to go now." He quickly pays the tab and ushers us out of the cafe. "Four gangsters who know me just went in," he says. Two hollow-cheeked Viets pull up to the curb in a red Firebird. One hops out and walks up to a newspaper box. He pounds it open with his palm and grabs a free paper, laughing. He glares at Brian, whose face falls blank. Brian turns away and disappears.

**E**ver stick your dick in quicksand? Me neither, but it must feel something like trying to grasp Vietnamese culture. It's impenetrable. As in the Vietnam War, it's impossible to pin down the enemy. A hundred friendly Vietnamese say they know nothing, then walk away. Accent marks of unknown words hook in my throat. Eels wriggle through my colon. Pigeons rise from pigeon soup and peck at my forehead.

Sgt. Frank Hauptmann, head of the Garden Grove PD's Asian gang unit, says Viets grew up with bullying secret police and assume all American lawmen are CIA.

Tiểu Thuyết  
Xã Hội Mafia  
Hoa Kỳ



Trường Sơn Lê Xuân Nhị

Nhà Xuất Bản Xuân Lê

Tái bản lần thứ I, 6/1991



"They don't want to report anything unless they've been shot or stabbed and they can't move and the cops come there and it's time to talk," he sighs. "Several of our restaurants have had shootings in them, and you'll have fifty or sixty people in there, and nobody saw anything. They were all 'in the bathroom.' There's one toilet stall in there. How can all sixty people be in there?"

He pops in a hidden-camera videotape of a drive-by shooting at Garden Grove's Tu Hai restaurant. In slo-mo black-and-white, showers of smoke and glass spray a window-side booth. Everyone ducks. Two waiters root under a counter for an arsenal of shotguns and pistols. Wearing a ruffled shirt and bow tie, one waiter lets the buckshot rip, knocking himself backward. Diners grab their gats and file outside like a trained SWAT team. A woman straggles behind, swiping a tip from an evacuated table. Seems like they've run through this fire drill before.

But they'd never admit it. "Shooting? What shooting? We've never had any shootings," insists a real-life Tu Hai waiter, his face scrunched in feigned confusion. His restaurant's shattered windows have been replaced and reinforced with thick plexiglass slabs. An extra protective shield rims the cash register. The waiter titters, shifting his weight. "We never have any problems." Bullshit.

Another restaurant, another denial. Sucking on curried shrimp in the Bolsa Mini Mall, I ask a beaming waitress about gangs. Her face drops. She seems surprised, suddenly depressed. "Gang members? Oh, no. We've *never* had them here. They *never* come here. Get in your car and ride down to the Little

Saigon Mall. It's only two minutes away. They go there all the time. But they *never* come here."

Al Butler drives us around the next night, scoping out Vietnamese murder suspects. (Two carloads of Viets traded words at Fountain Valley's Mile Square Park the previous Sunday. One kid ended up with his brains on the upholstery.) We glide past the Bolsa Avenue restaurant. "Oh, yeah? They never had gang members in there?" he laughs. "Hmm. Well, what about the time when someone shot up one, two, three, *four* cars outside when they were looking for Viet nationalists inside the diner? No, *they* weren't gang members."

Freeze. Butler's partner stops a spotless red Toyota MR2 fitted with spoilers, black vinyl bra, and racing tires. Real lowrider shit. We crawl up behind. An Alpine stereo system with refrigerator-sized speakers rattles the asphalt. Two chrome silhouettes of naked women straddle a gold-rimmed license plate. Custom window lettering spells MERCEDES BOYZ. Someone plunked about twenty-five Gs into this ride.

Two linguini-thin Vietnamese kids slide out, their angular faces splashed with red, blue, and yellow police lights. Hai, twenty, and Tuan, sixteen, laugh at each other and squat. The police snap Polaroids. Hai wears a gold Mercedes-Benz medallion. The cops want to know what's up. *This little thing was just a key chain that I liked and turned into a necklace. I didn't even know it meant "Mercedes."* The paint job? Uh, the car came that way when I bought it. Wow, Mr. Officer, I didn't know "Mercedes Boyz" was a gang name. You're right, Mr. Policeman, I'd better get that changed. Hai's either astoundingly dumb or too fucking smart.

Initials of family members still in Vietnam sit suspended in a spider web tattooed on Randy's forearm. On the other arm, a giant dragon slithers up from the inner wrist to the crack in his elbow. Randy (a name he chose for this article) speaks softly and smiles a lot, which disrupts his skinny little Wayne Newton mustache.

He's been in the US eleven years, five-and-a-half of them behind bars. He left Vietnam when he was eleven, bouncing from Malaysia to the Philippines to Alaska and finally into the arms of Catholic sponsors in Texas. He went to live with his brother and uncle when they immigrated from Vietnam to Orange County. Randy's memories of Vietnam are faint, though he holds a grudge against America for invading his country. "I remember my mom would take me, you know, hold my hand and step over people dead," he says. "That's all I know. In Saigon. I lived there and I come over here, and see, like, feel lonely over here, you know, because I have no family. I just got here. I feel very lonely and without my family. All I got is my uncle, my brother. And I lived with them...."

His eyes sink into the carpet. "When I just started in school, I don't have no friends at all. See, because I don't speak no English and stuff like that, you know? Like one time, I have to go away in the corner and play by myself. Buy a Snickers or something and go into the woods and eat. I always alone.... I made a lot of friends in school and stuff. And I went to their house, and it happened sometimes at dinner time, and I see the whole family sittin' down at the table, when they got dad, mom, sister, brother, everything, you know, and I think, I say, 'How come their family is so happy? I don't have it,' you know? Most of the time my brother went out. Whenever I feel like eating, I have to cook it myself. You know, eat it myself. That's why it make me sad, you know?"

He met some gangsters during a trip back to Texas. A drinking buddy invited Randy home, plied him with whisky, and asked for his help in a burglary. Feeling warm, Randy complied. "They told me, 'Let's go do something,' you know? I said, 'Let's go do it! I'm on the move.'... I made friends. And they close to me more than my family, I mean my brother and stuff. I think these guys must care for me more than my family. So I cared for the gang. You know, whatever they do, I do. Especially I don't want to look bad, be called chicken and stuff like that. You know, I want to be somebody."



Randy started rolling with a gang based south of Houston. He lived with about ten other members in the same house, where they smoked weed and got on each other's nerves. The gang later split from the house and began living in motel rooms. That suited Randy's teenaged gonads fine, because he could bring *girls* to his motel room, something forbidden by his brother back in Orange County. When asked what he liked about America, he offered the same word every other Viet used without exception: "Freedom. You can go anywhere, you can eat anyplace, and nobody gonna bother you. In Vietnam—I just got a letter from my mom not too long ago, and she told me if you got a chicken and you want to eat one, you have to let the communists know before you can kill it."

Faced with freedom (and all the Kentucky Fried Chicken he could ever care to eat), Randy went wild. "I only go and have fun, OK? Yeah. That's what I am. Go have fun. Of course, yes, you have to get money before you can go have fun." His first crimes were puny, things such as stealing car radios or busting into video

games and making off with the quarters. "It's fun, you know?... It's more exciting when you go and steal with about four or five guys, going in a car at nighttime, going driving around looking for a car that's got a stereo, you have to pick the lock to get in there, you know? Sometimes people chasing you and stuff. What happens when you got back is you talk about it, you know? All get high and talk about it and laugh.... I think it's more fun than to stay home."

He started free-falling through America, plunging from petty crime to armed robbery. He was even arrested for homicide, but the charges were dropped due to insufficient evidence. Texas lawmen nailed him after only his second robbery. Randy did two years in a prison wing with thirteen other Viets. He saw many of his friends killed in prison riots. "I think I'm very bad," he says. "I think I was bad, OK? Badass. But I don't think so no more. Compared to somebody else. But I always thought I was bad. Especially when I got the gun with me," he says, bursting into laughter.

"Long as I make the money today, I live



for today," he says, his right leg bobbing up and down. "I don't believe in nothing. ... 'Cause when I was young, I was crazy. I was very crazy. I'm serious, you know? See, like, when I was young, when I was going out, I don't like people lookin' at me crazy. First of all, staring at me and I don't like it—'What the fuck you lookin' at?' You know? If the guy got a heart, I'll start fighting him. That's the way I am. ... I got pulled a gun on my head once, right here, Brookhurst and Euclid? I got pulled a gun on my head, and I told him to go ahead and shoot."

Cold blood. Set loose from a Texas prison, Randy fluttered back to Orange County and soon developed a full-blown coke habit. Dancing at a party, he saw a girl next to him get iced by gangsters who were gunning for someone else. When Randy fucked up an armed robbery in Westminster, a Vietnamese homeowner planted two lead caps in his abdomen. At the time, Randy wished he'd died.

"When I got caught, when I got shot, I don't want to live. My friend told me they gonna take me to the hospital, but I go, I'll put a gun on his head. I told him, 'If you take me to the hospital, I'm gonna shoot.' I mean, I'd give up my life, you know, I don't even care anymore. I feel like I wanna *die* or something. And I would pass out. They'd throw me in the corner and just call the ambulance, and I didn't know, you know? And it was scary. After I woke up, I thought I was no more. I don't know nothing. I started to get up. Just hurt, you know? And I look around, and there's all kinds of wires in my nose and everything. I thought, 'You know, I'm in the hospital.'"

Washed with sterile lights in a police substation, Randy's now on parole. He says gang life's getting too hairy. When he started moving with gangs in '83, the worst weapon he saw was a knife, maybe an occasional revolver. These days it's high-tech ballistic warfare, video games *vérité*. Randy says Asian pride will cause gang violence to swell. "The way they are is, 'You better than me? I want to be better than you. See, if I be better than you, you want to be better than me.' They keep goin' up. That's to me how I feel. And even crazier."

But not Randy. Not anymore. He's got a steady girlfriend and a job delivering furniture. It pays a grand a month—the same amount he would make sacking just one Viet house. But five months out of jail, Randy swears he'll never go back. "My friends, all my friends, most of them in jail right now. Most of them. And some of them,



if they not in jail, they die. And if they not die, they're married."

Yikes! Around the age of twenty, the bulk of Viet street gangsters quit, settle down, get hitched, start businesses, have children, blah, blah, blech. For those who bail out, their gang membership was almost (in a sick, bloated sense) a rite of passage, a way of sowing their wild oats. Don't worry—when they leave, there are plenty of trigger-happy thirteen-year-olds eager to fill the vacancy.

The kids coming up today are a different breed from Randy. They're relatively affluent and Americanized. Contrary to what you might expect, their minds aren't twisted from war trauma; the majority of the pee-wee gang members are too young to remember *anything* about Vietnam. (Most of the over-twenty-five set, the ones who grew up with napalm and random

bombs, are upstanding citizens.) The new gangsters come off like suburban brats with too much time on their hands.

"I got one friend that he just got out of jail, as a matter of fact, not too long ago," Randy says. "His parents had a jewelry store right here on Bolsa, and he gets everything he asks his parents. New car? His parents buy him a new car. Everything he gets. He got a wife and kids. But he still hangs around, goes off with people. I don't know why—I mean, I can't—if his parents treat him wrong, I can understand it. But everything he asks, he get it. But I don't know why. I just can't understand it. But I asked him, 'What do you do that for?' I mean, 'Just for *fun*,' that's what he tells me."

“Let's look at it *this* way: The Vietnamese used to be a rural people, mostly," says Andrew Lam, editor of San Jose-based *Asian Insights* magazine. "The culture is very much rooted to the land. I remember villages that were two kilometers away, you know, from each other, that had different accents. What it means is that it's very much a type of sedentary culture where you are defined by the extended family and so on around you. And I think that the psyche that happens to a lot of us is that you're sort of taken away from that and put onto another landscape where mobility is the key thing in America, where you become nomadic. I think it's very much the American requirement: To be in America, you have to be capable to move about. And not only from one city to the next, but from across country and so on. From one job to the next and so on. So the kind of bonds that we make in this country are minimal. You sort of burn your bridges when you move somewhere else. And that's very much deleterious to the Vietnamese psyche, where if you had a childhood where everything is so well-defined for you, to becoming American, where you move about. ... I think it does something to your soul."

Lam, twenty-eight, has spent more than half his life in the US. He left Saigon on April 29, 1975, the day before it fell. He once wrote that "Americans did indeed win the [Vietnam] War," because of the eagerness with which Viets (both here and in Southeast Asia) are swallowing capitalism. "It struck me as always being that creating from minimalism is the Vietnamese soul," he says, "but, of course, when you get to America, what's the point? I talked to one kid who made a living for the longest time scavenging for paper in

Saigon. And so, when I took him to Berkeley, where I went to school, and he saw all these huge trash bins with all discarded papers and everything, and he's like, 'Oh, my God, back home this is my living, my living for two months.' So there's no sense of [minimalism] right now. We can shrug off all that and embrace the immediate."

Pow! Minute Rice. Microwaveability. "For them to come to America with an established Little Saigon and seeing other Vietnamese well-off means they want instant gratification," Lam says. "It's very influential, the American dream. I think the problem is that, in the rush of trying to get all that without the necessary backing of values and education, the only tactic, really, is to join gangs," he says, adding that a Viet gang had robbed his friend's neighbors two days previously. "In this country, it's a strange thing, but excessiveness becomes more of a characteristic of Vietnamese-Americans than anything else. You go to a Vietnamese wedding and you see how decked-out everybody is, the women in wonderful bouquets, and some even wear a tiara, and they drive Mercedes-Benzes and Jaguars. In some way, it is a way of saying [this is] a reward for all that suffering, I suppose. But it goes unrestrained. It's so easy to rob, because these kids dress well, they come in somewhere in the middle of the wedding of three hundred people, they follow whoever has a lot of money home. They have walkie-talkies, and they follow whoever has the most diamonds. ... It's all keeping up with the Joneses, and it becomes pathetic, because in some ways, the American dream becomes more like an American nightmare."

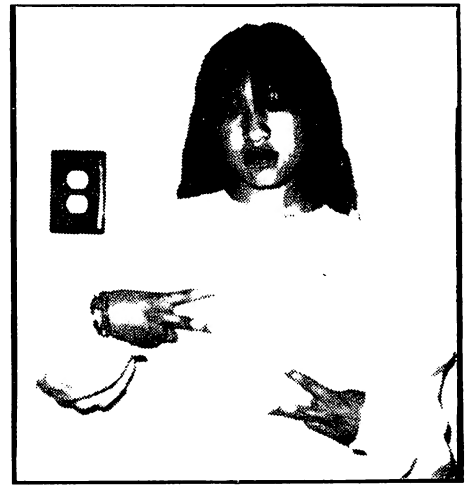
**S**ilk-shirted Vietnamese kids jerk arrhythmically on the dance floor, generating a cloud of designer cologne. Johnny-O, the club owner, wears pop-bottle glasses and a baggy olive suit. He polices the front door, flanked by two black security guards with metal detectors. Johnny don't take no mess.

"They [gangs] spread the rumor they will stop by on the weekend to shoot the people who come here, to try to scare my customers," he says, as if biting into a lime. "They just try to intimidate me. They say, 'Hey, guy, we stop by tonight with guns.' When I resist them, they all the time tell me, 'You will see your time, man.'"

He hates gangs, and the feeling's mutual. One crew vandalized his car three times. They tried to set it afire the fourth time, but they torched the wrong vehicle. A few months back, they stabbed someone in Johnny's parking lot. On separate nights, they've followed him, his wife, and his sister home, demanding protection money. Johnny recently moved his family into a new apartment. "I tell you—you cannot be polite to these people," he says. "If you are polite, they'll think you are afraid of them." Johnny's the exception, a Viet who reports everything to the police.

His pregnant wife, almost a head taller than Johnny, seems disgusted. "A lot of these kids, I think, have an identity crisis," she says. "I don't think they do it for the money. These aren't homeless kids. They have lots of money. I think they do it for thrills."

Johnny left Vietnam in 1975, ricocheting from Paris to Orange County. "One thing about American culture is violence," he says. "I tell my wife I don't want to buy toy



guns for my kids." He refuses entry to a snazzy pair of males wearing pointy, steel-tipped shoes. "I think the Vietnamese are not a violent society," Johnny says. "They see too many violent movies here, and to get a gun is too easy. That's influenced them a lot. [The current street price in Orange County for Uzis and AK-47s is about a hundred and fifty dollars, less than the cost of a half-ounce of sinsemilla or a cheap VCR.] ... And they don't have parents, they don't have relatives to control them. They step a little bit into the movie." A pink-faced Westminster cop plays Rambo outside, slapping a metal flashlight in his palm and heckling Viet teens.

Johnny's seen a few movies himself. "I don't call people like these gangsters 'cold,'" he says. "I call them crazy. They try to chop-chop-BANG! They try to beat people's families. ... But if they try to rob me at home, they'd better be fast. And if they try to hurt my baby, I will show them like Chuck Bronson in *Death Wish*."

One of Johnny's rejects sits outside the club on a coin-operated kiddie ride. Johnny's not too popular, eh? "Yeah, he's popular," says the kid, rocking back and forth on a toy airplane. "He's *real* popular. He's the number-one man on the hit list."

**M**inh, twenty-two, is a junkie gangbanger who always wears long sleeves. His right eye was cracked with a baseball bat years ago in a gang scuffle. Permanently ruptured, it's a milky, motionless grey marble. His good eye looks straight into mine, but the other one's somewhere else, someplace far off.

Minh (not his real name) belongs to one of the "Boyz" clubs mentioned earlier. A hyperkinetic chain-smoker with a honking voice, he's annoyingly likeable. Minh's a bit





old for street bangin', but he's got a rep as a loose cannon, a ruthless fuck. Nothing scares him. "A lot of people think that talking to Americans is talking to undercover FBI," he says, standing between two stone lions at the Asian Garden Mall. "I ain't worried about it, you know? I don't take any shit from anybody. I can take care of myself."

He says gang members are cultural boat people floating in limbo. "They don't feel Vietnamese and they don't feel American. They're somewhere in between. They come over here with no parents, they try to go to work and to go to school, but they say, 'Fuck it,' you know? 'Let's play the American game.' So I came here, I met the wrong people, and I slide down and down. That's why I'm trying to go up now." Criminally inactive (or so he says), Minh's thinking about going straight.

He laughs and lights a butt when asked why he joined a gang. "It's not a gang," he says, exhaling smoke. "It's a 'group.' It's a bunch of guys who get together. But if one of them is bad, the rest will follow, and they'll start doing bad things. I was just hanging around one day, and before I knew it, I was *in* it. I don't need people to go with me if I want to rob a bank. I'll go in with a machine gun and hold up the place myself."

Minh's fresh out of the pen after clocking a sentence for a commercial robbery where the store owner was shot. Minh even did a little time in Vietnam. "Compared to jail over there, jail over here ain't shit," he says. "I'd rather do ten years here than one year in a Vietnamese jail. Especially if you're under eighteen here. You get a nice bed, three meals a day. They take care of everything. It's easy."

Pretend-bored Viet chicks stroll by in lobster-colored makeup. Minh's eye wanders. A pained Vietnamese woman scuttles across white linoleum, asking people if they've seen her runaway daughter. "The parents in Vietnam are very strict," Minh says. "The parents come over here, and they want to be strict like in Vietnam. They want us to bow, to obey. But it's different over here.... If the parents are too hard on them, they say, 'Fuck it. Fuck you,' you know, and they go." Minh's tastes run toward tailored clothes, fine food, and constant travel, scarce items in Vietnam. "You have to respect [the parents], but they don't know what's going on. This is America, so we don't listen to them. Freedom, you know?"

Freedom. Fun and freedom. Freedom



and fun. Stumble into a gaudy Westminster club through a wooden-bead curtain, past a small Buddhist shrine. Rainbow lasers lacerate the smoky room. Beneath a spinning mirrored ball, a girl sings over recorded tracks. An MC follows with jokes in Vietnamese, then a performer who can only be described as Robert Goulet by way of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A woman, her hair sprayed and pulled into a spiky black hydra, slinks up to my table. She calls herself Madame Le and wants to know why I'm there. Just stretchin' my toes, I tell her, but she doesn't buy it. She summons a linebacker-sized white man, who grins cunningly and sits across the table, saying nothing. Madame Le rubs up against me. Uh, no squid tonight, thanks. Too much sweat, too much gut-searing Vietnamese coffee. I retreat.

Madame Le's business cards sit near the cash register in a pastry shop down the road. She kneels near flowers in a glossy color photo, looking as innocent as a pit viper can possibly look. She's an entertainer, perhaps? "No, she's the club owner," says the cashier, blushing like a schoolboy. "She's not a singer, but she knows how to do *business*. Hee, hee!" Police later tell me she runs pussy, heroin, and firearms. The American dream!

**Y**ou weren't hoping for a happy ending, were you? "Everything, basically, has increased," says Orange County Deputy Probation Officer Bob Gates. "The numbers, the violence, the mobility. They're more sophisticated in all those aspects.... They're very good students with regard to criminal behavior. They tend not to make similar mistakes twice."

Unlike Americans. Remember the murderous *Marielitos*, Castro's "gift" to Miami? In January, 1990, a mellowing Vietnamese government began releasing political prisoners from communist "re-education camps." Thirty thousand ex-cons and their families, about a hundred thousand Viets all told, are on a waiting list for American citizenship. An estimated two hundred thousand more are waiting to get on the waiting list. Experts guess that forty percent of the new immigrants will wind up in Orange County. Culturally awkward upon arrival, they'll be gullible targets of gang intimidation. Their sons and daughters are potential gang recruits.

Tran's been in Orange County only nine months. He was one of the first political prisoners to be released. His nose, like his homeland, swerves left and right in an 'S' shape. A gang of communist jail guards broke it back in the late seventies. He never got it fixed.

Shortly after arriving in the US, Tran (another *Viet-nom de plume*) wrote a poem called "A Fairy Tale," dedicated to boat people killed at sea before they reached America. He gave me a xeroxed copy, altered only by a thick crust of white-out covering his real name. This is an excerpt:

*Millions of Vietnamese have passed by  
Most of them have died  
Some in fishes' stomachs  
Some tied in bags  
Some scattered all around  
Others' legs and hands bound  
In many different positions, indeed  
But only one purpose altogether they meet  
That is, FLEEING FOR FREEDOM.*

"In Vietnam," Tran says, "in the restaurants on the walls, they have big letters, 'THE WALLS CAN HEAR YOU, SO BE QUIET.'... If you tell a small lie, the people won't believe you. But if you tell a big lie again and again, they'll believe it."

He's incensed that communists rule Vietnam and prays for the day when they're overthrown by force. Like many American Viets, he doesn't want the US to establish ties with 'Nam until the Marxists are tossed out. "Now I think the communists are longing to make good relations with the United States government because they are dying," Tran says. "They are collapsed. If we wait, we don't need to make friends with a man who is lying on the bed and waiting for death to come."

America's Vietnamese population is still tweeky about THE WAR. There are too many raw nerves in their neighborhood and too many guns. Most exiled Viets are staunch anti-communists and chafe at open political discussion, especially if it's leftist. Outspoken Viet-magazine editors have been rubbed out gangland-style in California, Texas, and Virginia. Viets take their politics verrrry seriously.

Trouble is, a fraction of American Viets are sworn communists or communist sympathizers. "They are dead people," Tran says. "They have no mind.... There were some people who dared to say something supporting the communist government. They were shot. In contrary, there were some who said something anti-communist. They were shot, too." Sound familiar? The issues aren't much different from seventeen years ago. If the two sides go at it, get ready for another movie sequel: *Vietnam War II—This Time, the Turf is American*.

The kids on the streets are a generation removed from Tran's little war. They speak

better English than their parents. At school, they learn to view their ethnicity as a millstone. Aching to assimilate, they acquire a distaste for all things Vietnamese. They lash out at other Viets, burying their heritage in an avalanche of rage.

In the United States, it's easy to run away. You can change your name and address, even your face. Minh the one-eyed gangster recently bought himself a glass eyeball. He can't see any better, but people stopped looking at him like he's a freak.

Young Viets are media babies. Orphaned or neglected by their parents, they hang together and immerse themselves in a thrill-a-minute combination of Disneyland and Armageddon, a

world where war and leisure are synonymous. Gangs learn to solve their problems like John Wayne did.

"Because of the freedom of America—sometimes I feel it's crazy," Tran says. "Your government and newspapers and TV and cinema—it's so violent! I even watch sometimes on TV, and I feel something sucking me in. Sometimes even I'm affected by the violent film," he says, his upper lip twitching. "Even my nephews [and] cousins see films and go, 'That was a good film. The guns shot really fast.'... They imitate. The violence is all around us." ■

*Written by J.G., this article originally appeared in Playboy in a newzier, less self-indulgent form. He signed a contract forcing him to tell you this.*

